

# Culture and Communities Committee

10.00am, Tuesday, 1 February 2022

## People's Network and Open Plus

Executive/routine	Executive
Wards	All
Council Commitments	<a href="#">35</a>

### 1. Recommendations

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- 1.1 Culture and Communities Committee is asked to:
- 1.1.1 Note the information provided on the People's Network (PN) and Open Plus;
  - 1.1.2 Note that the infrastructure to support the PN is no longer fit for purpose and that the service could no longer be available from July 2022; and
  - 1.1.3 Note the intention to reallocate £350,000 of capital funding (from Open Plus) to the PN, in order to update the hardware for the existing free public access to computing and internet service across the city; and
  - 1.1.4 Refer this report to the Council on 24 February 2022 to approve the proposed reallocation of capital funding as set out in paragraph 1.1.3.

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# Report

## People's Network and Open Plus

### 2. Executive Summary

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- 2.1 This report provides details of the requirement to update the hardware which sits on the People's Network (PN) which provides free public access to computing and internet services through the city's libraries and an update on the Open Libraries solution (Open Plus) which the Council provided funding of £350,000 for in 2017.
- 2.2 The report seeks approval to reallocate the Open Plus funding to contribute towards an upgrade to the People's Network.

### 3. Background

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#### **People's Network (PN)**

- 3.1 The PN was developed nationally throughout the United Kingdom (UK) in the early 2000s.
- 3.2 The PN provides free public access to computing and the internet through a network of public access Personal Computers (PCs) across libraries. It also enables customers to use library WiFi (wireless) to access the PN through their own devices.
- 3.3 A Library and Information Commission (LIC) report in October 1997 considered public libraries as the ideal vehicle for a national network to 'foster the spread of vital new technological skills among the population'.
- 3.4 The New Opportunities Fund (NOF) was established with £100 million of lottery funding to support the establishment of a UK wide People's Network. Once in situ, the ongoing upgrade and development of the PN rests with the local authority or Trust.
- 3.5 The PN benefits citizens who do not have access to computers, the internet, WiFi and printing. From April 2019 to March 2020 there were 232,596 PN bookings and 78,828 unique users. Since libraries reopened in May 2021, with limited occupancy levels under Covid-19 guidance, there were 11,452 public internet and computer bookings up until end November 2021.

- 3.6 However, the current PN due to the age of the devices are not able to run supported and secure versions of the operating system or software. The current devices are already in extended Microsoft support for MS Windows 7 and this extended support for the supporting server infrastructure is unlikely to be available beyond July 2022. The removal of support is in line with the vendor's fixed support policy of at least 10 years from product launch, which was in May 2008. The significant risk is that the PN service could not be provided for citizens beyond this date.

### **Open Plus**

- 3.7 In [February 2017](#) the Council agreed to allocate £350,000 of capital funding to support an Open Libraries solution (Open Plus) in Edinburgh City Libraries.
- 3.8 Open Plus technology interfaces with the Library computer system and self-service kiosks to enable customers to have access to basic library services. The technology is used to open and close the library, controlling and monitoring a range of equipment in the library - door access, security gates, lights, self-service kiosks, PN computers, closed circuit television (CCTV), public address (PA) system and security alarms. It is dependent on having a reliable Library Management System (LMS) (the LMS operates the catalogue, stock ordering, membership, item reservations, loans and returns), up to date self-service kiosks and a PN.
- 3.9 Open Plus has been implemented in a number of library authorities in the UK as a means of extending library opening hours and services to local communities by providing access to the library service and buildings outwith normal opening hours, whether there is a library member of staff present or not. The funding was intended to enable the Council to test this concept as a way of mitigating a planned reduction in library hours (which was due to be implemented from April 2017).
- 3.10 The reduction in library opening hours was not implemented and existing opening hours were maintained across the library service.
- 3.11 In addition, research into the introduction of Open Plus in Edinburgh concluded that its success would require significant improvements in library Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and indicated that Open Plus is best installed as part of a new library provision or refurbishment, where the technology can be considered as part of the overall design rather than retrofitted within an existing library layout.
- 3.12 Therefore, the libraries service concluded that the Library ICT technology provision, including challenges of reliability which were experienced with the LMS at that time, presented a risk to the potential success of Open Library and, as a result, Open Plus has not been implemented in Edinburgh and the capital funding has been rolled-forward.

## **4. Main report**

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- 4.1 As outlined in paragraph 3.6, the current PN in Edinburgh is no longer fit for purpose.

- 4.2 The loss of vendor support will result in the required decommissioning of the existing PN and will mean that access to computer services, the internet and printing facilities in libraries across the city will no longer be available after June 2022.
- 4.3 Therefore, it is essential that the hardware which sits on the PN is updated by 30 June 2022, in order to be fully operational before the infrastructure support arrangements end.
- 4.4 Updating the hardware which sits on the PN will:
  - 4.4.1 Greatly improve the network's digital offer;
  - 4.4.2 Widen its appeal for citizens by modernising the library service to better meet the needs of users (e.g. introducing wireless printing and providing more up to date software such as Microsoft Office Professional); and
  - 4.4.3 Future proof the service.
- 4.5 The one-off installation cost of the refreshed PN has been estimated at £429,000. This investment cost has been minimised and demonstrates best value for the Council by repurposing (recycling) existing Council computer desktops (hardware) (which helps to make for a more sustainable solution, avoiding the unnecessary and costly purchase of new equipment).
- 4.6 In order to progress the implementation of the new PN, it is proposed to reallocate the £350,000 which were originally allocated to Open Plus to contribute towards the PN installation costs.
- 4.7 In addition, to recognise the potential benefits of Open Plus in Edinburgh, the infrastructure to support a future Open Library model has been incorporated into design plans for the new Macmillan Hub at Muirhouse (North Edinburgh Arts, Library and Early Years) and Ratho Hub (Early Years and Library).
- 4.8 This will provide the opportunity to test the concept of Open Plus in Edinburgh Libraries, as was originally intended by the Council in 2017 when the funding for this was allocated.

## **5. Next Steps**

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- 5.1 Committee are asked to note the information provided on the requirement to replace the existing PN in order to update the hardware for the existing free public access to computing and internet service across the city and to refer this report to the Council on 24 February 2022 for a decision on the reallocation of capital funding as set out in the report.
- 5.2 If the Council agrees to the utilisation of the Open Libraries capital funding to update the hardware which sits on the PN, the Libraries service will immediately commission CGI to implement the PN upgrade. It is hoped that this will be in place by 30 June 2022.

## **6. Financial impact**

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- 6.1 The cost of updating the PN in Edinburgh City Libraries is expected to be (one-off) £429,000. It is proposed to utilise the £350,000 allocated for an Open Libraries solution to enable this upgrade to be progressed. The balance of funding will be met from other available existing capital funds.
- 6.2 An annual revenue cost of circa £23,000 will be required for system to ensure that it remains supported. This cost will be met from the Libraries service revenue budget.
- 6.3 To provide an Open Library model in design plans for new libraries, depending on the supplier, it is expected that (the capital) installation will cost up to £6,000, with associated annual revenue costs of up to £5,000.00 per library. There will be additional heating and lighting costs for the Open Library hours. These costs will be built into the budget for the development of the new libraries.

## **7. Stakeholder/Community Impact**

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- 7.1 The benefits of updating the hardware which sits on the PN are outlined in paragraph 4.4 and the benefits of Open Plus are set out in paragraph 3.8.
- 7.2 The significant risk to the Service is that we would not be able to provide PN services to our citizens beyond this date.

## **8. Background reading/external references**

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- 8.1 None.

## **9. Appendices**

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- 9.1 None.